



File Code: 1950

Date: April 30, 2014

Dear Interested Party:

The Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests are starting the next phase of revising the Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the Francis Marion National Forest (Francis Marion). The Francis Marion has developed an Assessment of the ecological, economic and social conditions on the Forest, and the plan development phase of revising the forest plan officially began with the publication of a Notice of Initiation, which was published in the *Federal Register* on September 30, 2013. This next phase now involves beginning the work on the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that will accompany the development of the revised plan. The Notice of Intent to develop an EIS was published in the *Federal Register* on April 30, 2014.

The US Forest Service has identified you as an individual, organization or agency that may be interested in the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Francis Marion. We are inviting you to submit comments during this scoping period to help us refine the list of areas that need to be changed in the existing forest plan, and to help us further develop our proposal to address those areas that need to be changed. A preliminary description of our Need to Change, and a document that details our proposed management strategies, are available on the website <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/scnfs/fmpln>. Your comments will also help us to identify any issues or concerns with the proposal that will lead to developing alternatives to the proposal in the EIS.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Forest Plan for the Francis Marion provides broad management direction for approximately 260,000 acres of national forest land located in Berkeley and Charleston Counties in SC. See the attached document titled Francis Marion Proposed Action for more information on the Francis Marion National Forest and the proposed action. See section 1.7 of the attachment for more details.

As is identified in the Notice of Intent, it is anticipated that a Draft Revised Plan and Draft EIS will be released in January 2015, and the Final Plan and Final EIS released in November 2015. In addition to the documents described above, other work products are available for public review at this point in time, such as, an approximation of the ecological systems and an analysis of habitats and species. All documents and work products that are available for public review are posted on-line at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/scnfs/fmpln>. Meanwhile other work products, such as the wilderness evaluation, timber suitability and the timber harvesting schedule will not be available until summer or fall.



PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose and need of this proposal is to revise the Francis Marion Forest Plan. The last forest plan was signed in December 1995. The Forest is revising the current forest plan to reflect new information, changing public values, emerging issues, and other related resource concerns. A detailed description of the areas of the existing forest plan that have been preliminarily identified as needing to be changed is available at <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/scnfs/fmpln>.

HOW TO COMMENT

The public has 45 days from the date the Notice of Intent was published in the *Federal Register* to comment on the Notice of Intent, the Preliminary Need for Change, and the Proposed Action. So comments should be received at the address shown below by June 14, 2014.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record and will be available for public inspection. Comments submitted anonymously will be accepted and considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Specific written comments must be submitted to:

Francis Marion and Sumter NFs
Attn: Francis Marion Plan Revision
4931 Broad River Road
Columbia, SC 29212

Or by fax (803-561-4004), office (803-561-4000). The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered comments are: 8:00 am to 12 noon and 1:00 pm to 4:30 pm Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc, .docx) to <https://cara.ecosystem-management.org/Public/CommentInput?Project=40695>.

Please state "Francis Marion Forest Plan Revision" in the subject line when providing electronic comments, or on the envelope when replying by mail. Any comments you wish to provide should contain the following:

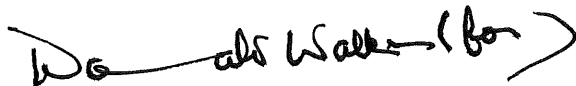
- Title of project: Francis Marion Plan Revision;
- Name, address and (if possible) telephone number;

The decision to approve the Revised Forest Plan for the Francis Marion will be subject to the Objection process identified in 36 CFR 219 Subpart B (219.50-219.62). According to 36 CFR 219.53(a), those who may file an objection are individuals and entities who have submitted substantive formal comments related to a plan revision during the opportunities provided for public comment during the planning process. Comments are considered "substantive" when they are within the scope of the proposal, are specific to the proposal, have a direct relationship to the proposal, and include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider (36 CFR 219.62).

The Responsible Official for the Francis Marion Revised Forest Plan is the Forest Supervisor for the Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests. Additional information on the Francis Marion Forest Plan is available on the webpage: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/scnfs/fmpln>.

If you would like more information or have questions relating to this proposal, please contact: Mary Morrison, Forest Planner, by email mwmorrison@fs.fed.us; or Tammy Robinson, Public Affairs Specialist, by email tammyrobinson@fs.fed.us; or by phone 803-561-4000.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Richard Lint" with a stylized flourish at the end.

JOHN RICHARD LINT
Forest Supervisor

Enclosure (1)

1.0 Introduction

This proposed action begins the discussion of our strategy to develop a revision of our current forest plan signed in December 1995. Over the years, some aspects of the forest plan remained valid, but most issues, conditions, and practices changed. This revision of the existing forest plan will incorporate: New information, Evolving issues and trends, Changes in national policies and direction, and Updated views from public users and stakeholders. This proposed action reflects our requirements as outlined in the new National Forest System Land Management Planning regulations (new planning regulations), dated April 9, 2012.

1.1. What is a forest plan

The purpose of a forest plan is to guide the overall direction for sustainable management of the Francis Marion by establishing desired conditions that will guide future projects, practices, uses, and protection measures. A land and resource management plan (also referred to as the “forest plan” or “the plan”) guides the general management direction of a national forest over a 15 year period.

As outlined in the 2012 forest planning regulations, “[P]lans will guide management of national forest system lands so that they are ecological sustainable and contribute to social and economic sustainability; consist of ecosystems and watersheds with ecological integrity and diverse plant and animal communities; and have the capacity to provide people and communities with ecosystem services and multiple uses that provide a range of social, economic, and ecological benefits for the present and into the future.”

1.1 Forest Plan Components and Requirements

As you read through this proposed action, you will see the following terms. These items are required forest plans components that will be developed over the next several months:

- **Desired condition** (*Vision*) is a narrative description of the condition expected and changes expected to occur as the Forest Plan is implemented. It is a description of resource conditions, capabilities, ecosystem functions, and human interaction. It does not describe outputs, activities or effects. The desired future condition is framed in the context of the difference from current conditions.
- Every forest plan can have geographic areas, management areas or both
 - **Geographic area** is a spatially contiguous land area identified within the planning area. A geographic area may overlap with a management area.
 - **Management area** is a land area identified within the planning area that has the same set of applicable plan components. A management area does not have to be spatially contiguous.
- **Objectives** are measurable, time-specific accomplishments that typically represent stages in reaching desired conditions.
- **Guidelines** do not approve or force actions but describe recommended parameters or technical and scientific specifications for use in designing projects and activities. The rationale for any deviation, however, must be documented in the project-level decision.
- **Standards** are specific management directions required for achieving resource protection; project-specific deviations require plan amendment.
- **Suitability of lands.** Specific lands within the Francis Marion National Forest will be identified as “suitable” for various multiple uses or activities based on the desired

conditions applicable to those lands. The forest plan will also identify lands within the Francis Marion as “not suitable” for uses that are not compatible with desired conditions for those lands. The suitability of lands need not be identified for every use or activity. Suitability identifications may be made after consideration of historic uses and of issues that have arisen in the planning process. Every plan must identify those lands that are not suitable for timber production (§ 219.11).

- The revised Francis Marion Forest Plan must meet the requirements on: sustainability (§ 219.8), plant and animal diversity (§ 219.9), multiple use (§ 219.10), and timber (§ 219.11).

Optional Forest Plan Components include:

- **Management Strategies or Management approaches** describe how we will achieve desired conditions over time.
- **Goals** are broad statements of intent, other than desired conditions, usually related to process or interaction with the public. Goals are expressed in broad, general terms, but do not include completion dates.
- **Partnership opportunities** or coordination activities that help move the Francis Marion toward the desired conditions described in the revised forest plan.

1.2 How We Use Your Input

Public comments received early in the process and provided during the scoping period are not only used in developing forest plan components, but also in developing the draft environmental impact statement.

Comments which are most meaningful and will be of greatest help in developing the proposed plan are those which address strategic direction for the Francis Marion or what the forest should look like or provide in the future. Comments that are directed towards very specific areas or projects may be outside the scope of plan revision process. Comments on the Assessment will be feed into the existing condition in the draft environmental impact statement. Some questions that you can help us answer:

- What are key components of ecological and social sustainability?
- How do we want the Francis Marion to look in the next 10 to 15 years? Forest plan components, such as desired conditions, management areas, standards and guidelines, which focus management activities, but also how we will protect resources, such as soil, water, and air quality.
- What management strategies are needed to accomplish work?

Public comments are also used to develop issues and alternatives that are part of the draft environmental impact statement. These issues and alternatives shape the analysis and discussions on impacts from potential management actions.

1.3 What's Next?

The Public Participation Strategy posted on our website

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/scnfs/fmpln> discusses the overall approach to public outreach and collaboration. We will continue our community conversations using a variety of techniques to

share information with you. To keep you informed, email blasts will be sent out to notify you of public meetings and information posted on our public website. To learn more past public meetings or to sign up for email blasts, go to our public website at:

<http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/scnfs/fmplan>.

After the scoping period ends, the team will complete a content analysis of the public comments and begin developing forest plan components and issue statements over the next several months. Public meetings will be scheduled in the coming months to discuss topics, including issues and alternatives and the development of plan components.

Estimated Process Timeline

- Plan Revision began in October 2012 with the Notice of Initiation.
- April/May 2014 – scoping begins with the publication of the Notice of Intent and the Preliminary Need for Change and the Proposed Action.
- June/July 2014 – plan revision team considers scoping comments and identifies issues.
- Summer/Fall 2014 – public meetings to discuss issues, and develop the proposed action and alternatives
- Fall/winter 2014 – effects to social, economic, and natural resources are analyzed for the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS)
- Winter/Spring 2015 – DEIS is released for public comment, public meetings held
- Summer 2015 – public comments are analyzed and changes to the DEIS are made
- Winter 2016 – final environmental impact statement (FEIS) is released to the public and objection period begins
- Summer 2016 – final decision signed

1.5 Location of the Plan Area

The Francis Marion is located in the heart of the “low country” of South Carolina. The Francis Marion is located within Berkeley and Charleston counties in southeastern South Carolina and contains 258,942 acres (see Figure 1-1). The land the forest occupies is a triangle formed by the Santee River to the north, the Intracoastal Waterway to the east, and Lake Moultrie and the Cooper River to the west.

The Forest comprises about 12 percent of the public lands in the State. Major highways through the Forest include U.S. Highways 17, 17A, 52, and state highways 41 and 45. The Forest is within a 30-minute drive of the Charleston metropolitan area and Interstate Highway 26. The area surrounding the Francis Marion National Forest is predominantly urban. Mount Pleasant and Moncks Corner, SC are in close proximity. While few people live within the boundaries of the Forest, the Francis Marion includes the communities of Awendaw, Huger, Jamestown and McClellanville. Persons per square mile in Berkeley and Charleston counties are 162 and 382, respectively. As a comparison, the State has 154 persons per square mile.

The Santee Experimental Forest, which is 6,067 acres, is located within the boundaries of the Francis Marion National Forest. The Santee Experimental Forest research operations are guided by the Southern Research Station and not by the Francis Marion. Research is centered on the ecology and management of forested wetland ecosystems in the South Atlantic Coastal Plain.

1.6 History of the Francis Marion National Forest

Much of the forest was acquired in the 1930s under authorities granted in Clark McNary Act and the Weeks Law of 1911 to acquire lands within damaged watersheds of navigable streams to provide sustainable sources of timber and water. Prior to forest planning, functional planning was directed primarily toward sustainable timber and wildlife management. The forest entered into early partnerships with the SC Department of Natural Resources for wildlife management and their goals focused largely on restoration of deer and wild turkey populations that had severely declined during the depression era.

This revision effort follows two previous forest planning efforts. The one in 1985 was directed at the increased emphasis to do forest-level planning as directed in the National Forest Management Act, but our available resource information and ability to process it effectively at landscape scales was limited in comparison to the tools today.

Hurricane Hugo came ashore near Bull Island, South Carolina, on September 21, 1989. Estimated maximum sustained wind at landfall was 138 miles per hour. The center of the eye passed within 5 miles of the Forest. Vast areas of the forest were blown down or damaged with a storm surge of up to 20 feet. Immediate concerns after Hurricane Hugo were life and safety, which included opening roads that were hidden under the fallen trees. It became obvious that the 1985 plan was no longer going to be effective guidance.

The 1996 Francis Marion Forest Plan focused on recovery efforts from Hurricane Hugo. On the Francis Marion National Forest, 60 percent, or about 92,500 acres, of pine received heavy or moderate damage; pine age-class distribution changed primarily to the 0 to 10-year age class; and about 43 percent of the bottomland hardwood species were broken and 43 percent were uprooted.

After the immediate safety threats were addressed, the Forest personnel focused on recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker, a federally endangered species. Many nesting trees with cavities were damaged, so recovery efforts focused on inserting artificial cavities. Other management efforts focused on creating foraging habitat. Today, the Francis Marion National Forest supports one of the largest populations of red-cockaded woodpecker in the world.

In 1996, the Forest staff also saw an opportunity to increase the amount of longleaf pine forest on the Francis Marion National Forest. Historically longleaf pine once dominated the coastal plains of SC, but past management efforts had established loblolly pine on the Francis Marion.

1.7 Francis Marion Proposed Action

The proposed action consists of three documents: an Assessment, a Preliminary Need to Change and Management Approaches that respond to the Need to Change statements. While these documents are posted on-line, hard copies are available upon request. Stop by the district office at 2967 Steed Creek Road, Huger, SC 29450 or by contacting the Francis Marion office at 843-336-3248 or the Supervisor's Office at 803-561-4000. Below is a brief description of each document and where it can be found on-line.

- The Assessment consists of specialists's reports and supporting supplemental reports. Several topics are covered including: wildlife habitats, at risk species, natural disturbances, recreation opportunities, etc. At the beginning of each subsection are findings that highlight: accomplishments, changed conditions, challenges, opportunities, data gaps, and research needs. This document is several hundred pages and is divided into sections to make it easier to pull from our public website at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/scnfs/fmplan>. It is anticipated that the Assessment will feed into Chapter 3. Existing condition in the draft environmental impact statement. Maps can be viewed on-line through the Talking Points.
- The Preliminary Need to Change focuses on direction that "needs to change" in the current Francis Marion forest plan. Using the findings in the assessment, the team developed Need to Change statements. These need to change statements form the scope of this proposed action. This document is also located on our public website at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/scnfs/fmplan>.
- Management strategies address Need to Change statements. This document is also located on our public website at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/goto/scnfs/fmplan>. Management strategies describe, in broad terms, how we will achieve desired conditions over time and consider priorities, such as program direction, budget trends, past program accomplishment and partnership opportunities. In some instances, these tentative management approaches will be applied to areas that are similar in some respect across the Francis Marion National Forest. These similar areas will be used to draft geographic areas or management areas. For instance, some management areas may contain similar ecosystems, features, uses, or special attributes that guide future project activities. Generally, national forests are suitable for a variety of uses that are compatible with the goals or desired conditions for an area.

Generally, the Forest Service has managed forest activities through a variety of separate resource programs. However, as we develop the forest plan, there is an integration of desired conditions and objectives across multiple program areas. Many of the resource programs will share similar objectives and contribute to multiple desired conditions. For example, ecosystem diversity objectives and watershed condition improvement are connected to the program strategies for species diversity, fire, soils, water, and healthy forest conditions, while recreation objectives are linked to management approaches for infrastructure and economic strategies. Below are two examples of where we need to integrate and partner on protecting and managing resources and providing benefits, such as recreation and revenue.

- The Wando area in the southeastern corner presents a number of challenges and opportunities. The Wando area is a block of national forest land closest to the urban development extending from North Charleston and Mount Pleasant, but this block also has the highest concentration of at risk species. How can we balance the needs of these rare plants and animals with the impacts to our neighbors?

- The US Highway 17 corridor provides social, recreational, and historic values. How can this area best be managed to benefit the public and maintain and enhance these benefits and uses?

The proposed action includes management approaches on the following resource topics:

Ecosystem Diversity (terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems) Restoring and maintaining a variety of native ecosystems on suitable sites is the foundation of our planning efforts. We plan to accomplish this primarily through vegetation management programs that result in improved habitats for a variety of plants and animals (including threatened and endangered species and species of conservation concern) and increased resilience to potential effects from climate change. Our management approach focuses on restoring and maintaining composition, structure, function and connectivity for terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems. Current guidelines on managing these ecosystems require that we consider ecological integrity and diversity as follows:

1. What is needed to maintain or restore the ecological integrity of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and watersheds in the plan area, including plan components to maintain or restore their structure, function, composition and connectivity.
2. What is needed to maintain or restore the diversity of ecosystems and habitat types including:
 - a) Key characteristics associated with terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem types;
 - b) Rare aquatic and terrestrial plant and animal communities; and
 - c) Native tree species diversity, similar to that which exists in the plan area.

Species Diversity (threatened, endangered and candidate species and species of conservation concern) Management strategies for sustaining species diversity emphasize ecological conditions that: Protect and promote improved habitat conditions for federally-listed species; and Support a diversity of native plant and animal species in the long term. Our overall approach for managing species diversity is achieved in cooperation with state, federal and private partners, and focuses on: Maintaining and restoring composition, structure, fire regimes and connectivity; Reducing non-native invasive species; Returning native ecological systems to appropriate sites; and Restoring historic fire regimes to the landscape.

Physical Environment (watersheds and soil, water and air quality) We propose to develop desired conditions and objectives for maintaining, restoring and monitoring the soil, water and air resources on the Francis Marion. Our management options vary with the resource and our ability to manage. National forest lands on the Francis Marion encompass only a small percentage of the streams and associated drainage areas within the coastal plain of the state. In addition, much of the impacts to air and water resources are due to activities outside of the area that the Forest Service manages. Therefore, our strategy is to focus on sustaining and improving watershed areas within national forest control while working cooperatively with other agencies and landowners to improve statewide watershed health and water, soil and air quality.

Healthy Forests (vegetation management, climate change, non-native invasive species, prescribed burning, lands and special uses,) Our overall strategy for achieving healthy forests is to use a combination of vegetation management practices including prescribed burning to restore

and maintain resilient native ecosystems. Desired conditions for the different ecological systems are the primary context for the health of forests on the Francis Marion. The emphases in this plan include:

- Maintaining and restoring fire adapted ecosystems and longleaf pine;
- Maintaining moderate stand densities in pine and pine-hardwood stands;
- Regenerating stands to either restore more desired species such as longleaf pine and/or to create young age forest stands for ecological sustainability; and
- Controlling non-native invasive plant species and insect and disease outbreaks

Infrastructure (roads, facilities, trails) Focusing on safety and maintenance of existing infrastructure (roads, trails and facilities) is the management strategy for the Francis Marion, which includes backlogged repairs and upgrades, improvements for environmental protection, disposal of facilities that are no longer needed and rehabilitation of user-created trails and roads. We anticipate limited infrastructure additions depending on funding availability.

Recreation, Cultural Resources and Forest Setting (wilderness, wild and scenic rivers, hunting, fishing, roadless, scenery) Management strategies for providing outdoor recreation opportunities, protecting heritage sites and maintaining a natural forest setting require balancing the increasing demand for more uses with protecting and maintaining existing desirable conditions. The Francis Marion National Forest provides a diverse range of quality natural and recreation opportunities in partnership with people and communities. The forest's niche is showcasing the diverse ecosystems that abound on the coastal plain through dispersed recreation opportunities. The Forest Service has a significant public stewardship responsibility for cultural resources in our care. Through public service the Forest Service provides opportunities to enhance cultural resources in our care and to learn about the past.

Economic Benefits The management strategies for the Francis Marion National Forest are to produce a steady flow of benefits which are essential to sustaining life and fulfilling basic human needs and desires. These benefits stem from a number of provisioning, regulating, cultural and supporting services produced by biophysical and ecological processes within the forest. Collectively known as ecosystem services, these environmental goods and services are complexly linked to the health and vitality of human and ecological communities. The forest's provision of ecosystem services promotes human health and well-being at local, regional, and global scales. Although the Francis Marion will not be managed for predetermined levels of ecosystem services, the revised Forest plan will be developed to sustain and promote the production of previously identified ecosystem services. The Francis Marion will strive to foster inclusion and strengthen the connection between people and the Forest in its planning process. The forest will actively engage and collaborate with neighboring communities, partners, other agencies, and representatives from Native American and Gullah/Geechee Nations to develop a collective vision for the National Forest in the future.

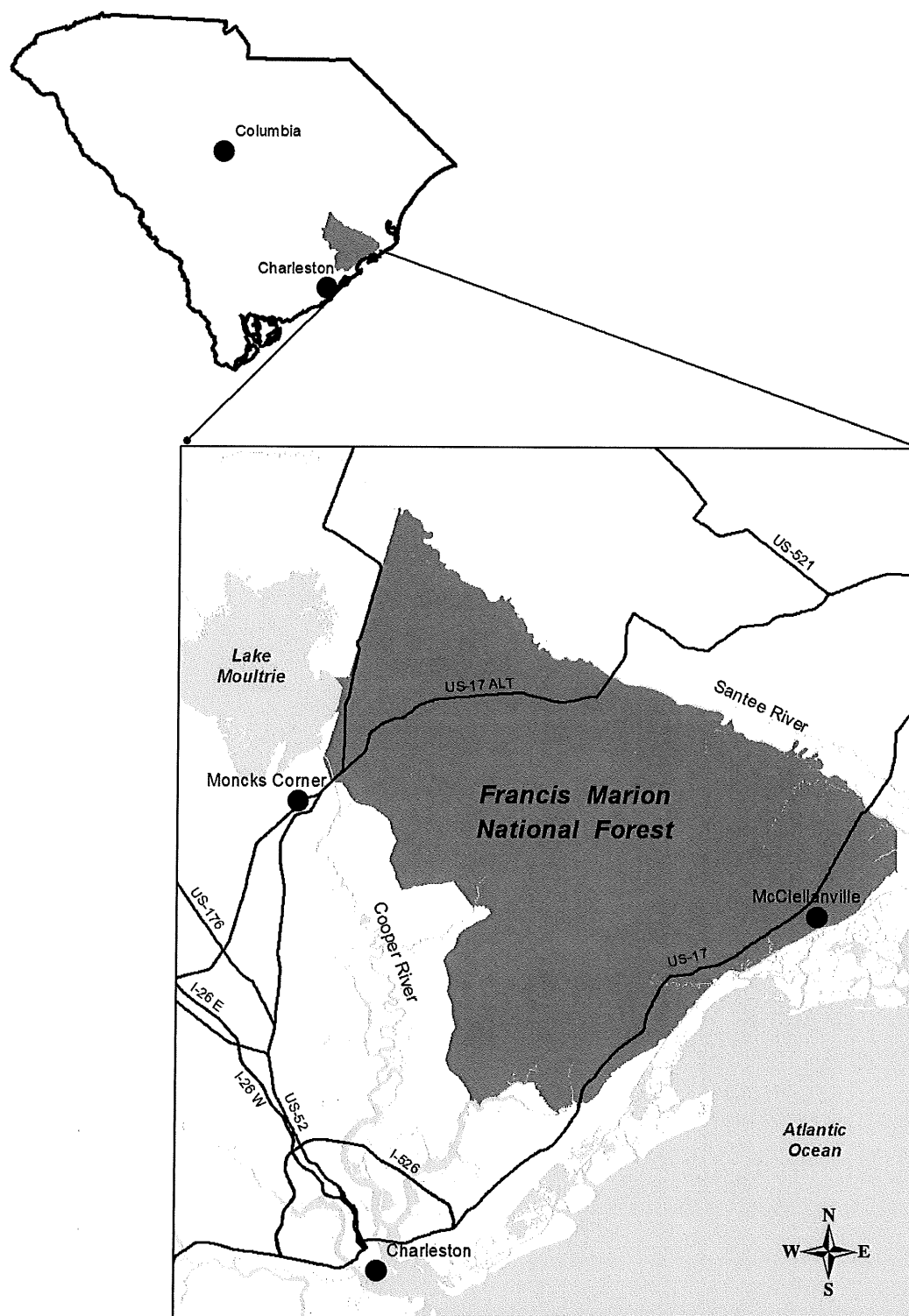


Figure 1-1. Vicinity map of the Francis Marion National Forest